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Cambridge City Hall
795 Massachusetts Ave.
Cambridge,
Middlesex County
Massachusetts

HABS No. MA-1038

P H O T O G R A P H S

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

AMERICA'S CITY HALLSCAMBRIDGE CITY HALL

Name: Cambridge City Hall

Location: 795 Massachusetts Avenue, between Inman and Bigelow Streets; Cambridge, Massachusetts Middlesex County

Present owner: City of Cambridge

Present occupant: City of Cambridge

Present use: City Hall; municipal offices

Significance: The City's most important public building, City Hall is imposingly sited, solidly built, and still serving its original purpose. A fine example of Richardsonian Romanesque style.

Part I: Historical Information

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection:

Land acquired by City of Cambridge in a series of purchases in 1888 (Middlesex County Registry of Deeds).

Building Permit granted to Frederick H. Rindge on March 29, 1889, Building Permit number 1662. Corner stone laid May 15, 1889 (Cambridge Chronicle).

2. Architect: Longfellow, Alden & Harlow (Alexander Wadsworth Longfellow, Jr. 1854-1934; Frank E. Alden, 1859-1908; Alfred B. Harlow, 1857-1927). This firm won a design competition sponsored by the prominent Cambridge land owner and industrialist Frederick Hastings Rindge, who donated the building. (Cambridge Tribune, May 19, 1888)
The winning design was published in American Architect and Building News, vol. 24, #657, July 28, 1888.

3. Builder: S. D. Willcutt

4. Plans: Building Permit 1662, issued March 29, 1889. Design published in American Architect and Building News, vol. 24, #657, July 28, 1888.

5. Alterations:

Some interior alterations, primarily dividing larger rooms to create more offices.

B. Historical Context

City Hall was a gift of Frederick Hastings Rindge, a prominent Cantabridgian and philanthropist who also donated the Public Library and the Manual Training School. It was designed by architects Longfellow, Alden and Harlow who won a competition for the design.

Part II: Architectural Information

A. Description of Exterior

Set back from the street on rising ground, City Hall is a monumental three-story structure center on an imposing 158-foot-high bell-and-clock tower. The building was designed to accommodate all departments of city government and was U-shaped in plan. It is an excellent example of Richardsonian Romanesque style, so much in vogue for public buildings in the 1880's. City Hall has three bays with over all dimensions of approximately 90'x150'. The load bearing stone walls are of beige Milford granite liberally trimmed with Longmeadow brownstone, creating an earthy polychromy. The hip roof is covered with dark gray rectangular slate with copper ridges. There are four dormers on the front with gable roofs and three finials. The central massive tower has two openings for bells on each of its sides. Above the front door is a balcony on four acanthus brackets, and bearing the following inscription in Roman caps: "God has given commandments unto men / From these / commandments men have framed laws by which to be / governed . It is honorable and praiseworthy to serve the / people by administering these laws faithfully . If the laws / are not enforced the people are not well governed"

B. Description of Interior

The U-shaped plan of City Hall consists of four floors typically arranged with a large EW hall, with offices off it on the S (front) and ends, and extending at each end N as two smaller halls with offices on each side of these also. The entrance flooring has pink marble floor with red bands and green marble border. Other covering is modern. The walls are plaster with fifty-three inch wainscotting.

Ceiling beams divide the ceiling spaces into large panels or "coffers" and are decorated with mouldings on each side. The cornice consists of dentils and egg and dart treatment. Of special importance is the Council Chamber. As reported in the Cambridge Tribune (December 13, 1890), "...the Aldermanic (Council) Chamber, 42 by 48 feet, has a coved ceiling, with panels and beams, and is 25 feet high. There is a gallery, 48 by 14, which will accomodate from 50 to 75 persons. The room is lighted with long windows on the side and others set high in the frieze in the rear.... The chamber is handsomely frescoed in terra-cotta gold."

C. Site

The building faces SSW and is set on a rather steep hill, well back from the street. To the rear is a depressed drive, for parking and the rear entrance. The entire lot has granite coping around it and a hedge.

Part III: Sources of Information

A. Architectural Drawings

American Architect and Building News, Boston, vol. 24, #657 (July 28, 1888) page 39.
Accepted design for Cambridge City Hall. Exterior view of building; longitudinal section; first, second and third floor plans. Building as constructed differs somewhat from published design.

B. Early Views: Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities
City Hall, from The Cambridge of Eighteen Hundred and Ninety-Six, Arthur Gilman, ed., opp. p. 78, Cambridge, Riverside Press, 1896.

C. Bibliography

1. Primary: Registry of Deeds, Middlesex County: Land acquired by City of Cambridge in a series of purchases in 1888. Deed books 1839, 1840, 1841, 1858, 1875, 1880, 1884.

American Architect and Building News, Boston, vol. 24, no. 657 (July 28, 1888) page 39.

Cambridge Chronicle, February 25, 1888
Guidelines for preliminary sketches submitted to architects.

Cambridge Chronicle, April 14, 1888
Plans from five architects received.

Cambridge Chronicle, Semi-Centennial Souvenir
of Cambridge, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1896

page 3, entrance to City Hall, photograph
page 20, interior photograph, corridor and stair
page 22, interior photographs, Common Council
page 2 Chamber, Aldermanic Chamber
page 25, laying of cornerstone, photograph

Cambridge Tribune, November 19, 1887
City Hall to be gift of F. H. Rindge

Cambridge Tribune, May 19, 1888
Complete description of building, exterior
view, longitudinal section, three floor plans.

Cambridge Tribune, August 11, 1888
Same description, cuts, etc., as May 19, 1888
Tribune but with different interior demensions.

Cambridge Tribune, February 2, 1889
Cellar begun.

Cambridge Tribune, May 11, 1889
Cornerstone to be laid. Same description and
exterior view as August 11, 1888 Tribune.

Cambridge Tribune, July 27, 1889
Progress report, description of stone being used.

Cambridge Tribune, August 2, 1890

Cambridge Tribune, Cambridge Semi-Centennial,
1846-1896, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1896, p. 62
Exterior photograph.

Stone, M. I., Jr., "The City Hall and Its Occupants,"
Cambridge Chronicle, Semi-Centennial Souvenir of
Cambridge, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1896, pp. 19-25.

2. Secondary: Cambridge Historical Commission, Survey of
Architectural History in Cambridge: Report Two:
Mid Cambridge, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1967
p. 42-43, discussion and photograph.

Cambridge Historical Commission, Survey of
Architectural History in Cambridge: Report Three:
Cambridgeport, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1971
pp. 98-99, discussion and photograph.

Eliot, Samuel A., 2nd, A History of Cambridge,,
Massachusetts, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1913,
p. 118, exterior photograph.

Historic American Buildings Survey

Gilman, Arthur, ed., The Cambridge of Eighteen
Hundred and Ninety-Six, Cambridge, Massachusetts,
1896, p. 78, exterior photograph.

Rettig, Robert Bell, Guide to Cambridge Architecture,
Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1969, H-1.

D. Likely sources not investigated

none

E. Supplemental material

none

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